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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH PROMINENT LABOR LEADER

REF: BOGOTA 3027; BOGOTA 2958; BOGOTA 3031

SUMMARY

11. (U) The Ambassador expressed USG support for the essential role unions play in healthy democratic societies in an October 29 meeting with the General Confederation of Workers (CGT). The CGT is one of the three main labor confederations in Colombia, with 270,000 members organized into approximately 180 unions representing the cut-flower, sugar cane, steel, and hotel and restaurant sectors. The meeting, which evolved into a critical discussion of U.S. trade and military policies with Colombia, was part of Post's proactive human/labor rights strategy (reftels). Immediately following their discussion, the Ambassador repeated his message to the press, although journalists were more interested in hearing about the U.S.-Colombian Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA). End Summary.

AMBASSADOR AND CGT AGREE TO DISAGREE

12. (SBU) CGT General Secretary Julio Roberto Gomez took advantage of a cordial October 29 meeting with the Ambassador to criticize the U.S.-Colombian Trade Promotion Agreement (CTPA) and the DCA. He argued that the CTPA would cause contraction in important Colombian sectors and lead to higher unemployment, given the asymmetries that existed between the two economies. He added that the DCA was fueling a regional arms race precisely when economic circumstances called for greater public investment in social programs, not weapons. Both initiatives were bad for workers, he stressed. The Ambassador said the CTPA would boost overall economic activity and employment, with exceptions in some limited sectors. The GOC's and USG's role was to support what was best for the majority of their citizens while compensating the losers. The DCA simply updated existing bilateral agreements concerning cooperation against illicit trafficking, illegal armed groups, and terrorism, the Ambassador explained.

OTHER AREAS FOR COOPERATION

13. (U) The Ambassador proposed greater cooperation on demining the Colombian countryside, and stressed the importance of the CGT's continued participation in a UNDP-led Labor Violence Study (reftel c) that aims to analyze the root causes of labor violence in Colombia. He said it was important to arrive at a baseline conclusion regarding labor violence that everyone -- including the GOC, business groups, labor, and the international community -- could agree on. Gomez was amenable to greater cooperation on demining. He also pointed out that the CGT was the first labor confederation to sign on to the UNDP study, and that it intended to remain fully engaged.

PRESS COVERAGE FOCUSES ON DCA

14. (U) Following their meeting, the Ambassador and Gomez addressed the media. The Ambassador gave brief remarks, stating that "strong and independent unions are essential, crucial elements of democracy." Media outlets covered the meeting, but largely focused

their reporting on the Ambassador's responses to questions about the DCA. Still, national outlets including El Tiempo (the leading national newspaper with 1.4 million readers) and Telepais (a national TV news program, estimated 507,000 viewers) ran stories that touched on the Ambassador's human/labor rights message. Moreover, the National Union School (ENS) widely disseminated a press summary to Colombian human rights and labor circles. The Embassy also released a press statement on the meeting.

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